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ABSTRACT

Improving the quality of learning is basic to raising academic standards. Research on postsecondary learning improvement has provided a base of practical knowledge to guide faculty and planners. Successful learning improvement programs share two essential characteristics: they are more comprehensive in the range of students' needs met, and they are better institutionalized into the academic mainstream. The four basic types of programs, in ascending order of effectiveness, are: (1) isolated remedial skills courses; (2) learning assistance to individual students; (3) course-related supplementary learning activities; and (4) comprehensive learning systems in academic courses. There are 26 critical variables for learning improvement related to goals and rationale, instructional methods and content, staff, and program evaluation. Obtaining an interdependence of learning improvement and instructional change is the purpose of the Decision Guide for Effective Programs. The Decision Guide offers greater control over educational processes and outcomes through more effective techniques of management, delivery, and evaluation. This document includes a four-item bibliography, and an order form for the full report upon which this summary is based and for a related research report, both available from the Association for Study of Higher Education. The Decision Guide is part of the full report. (DC)

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Raising Academic Standards: A Guide to Learning Improvement

Ruth Talbott Keimig

Making decisions in an imperfect world

Most educators make decisions that directly affect students' learning and retention. Whether as faculty, administrator, program manager, student services coordinator, or specialist, an educator's daily decisions have cumulative effects, for good or bad, that may not be readily discernible in the immediate situation. Yet a choice must be made, usually among alternatives that are poorly defined, shadowed by uncertainties beyond any one person's control, and constrained to a less-than-ideal set of possibilities.

The demographic depression and the prevailing mood of decline, diminished resources, and threatened retrenchment are new, at least to this generation of faculty. So are the kinds of students new to the many institutions that have altered their admissions practices and curricula, as most institutions have done. Suppose too many students just drop the course, or transfer, or choose a different program with fewer and easier requirements? Compelled to choose between academic quality and retention and given today's underprepared mix of students, many educators make compromising and regrettable decisions.

Improving the quality of learning of admitted students is basic to raising academic standards, because there is no other way for current students to succeed by academically honest criteria in sufficient numbers to ensure the survival of our institutions and our programs. This conclusion is supported by four recent Carnegie Councils, whose final reports state that the improvement of instruction is the most urgent need in colleges and universities today.

Using research to improve learning and retention

Researchers who have studied the effects on grade point average (GPA) and retention of many different learning improvement programs have much to say to the on-line educator about what works – and what does not work – to improve learning in college. Unfortunately, this extensive and important body of knowledge, derived from over 20 years of collective experience with postsecondary learning improvement, is generally inaccessible to academic faculty, administrators, and other decision makers who are oriented primarily toward their own disciplines. Yet the findings and conclusions from these studies provide a base of practical, tested knowledge that could guide faculty and planners to those practices with a record of having produced better learning. Successful practices and key operating decisions are analyzed and ranked in the Decision Guide For Effective Programs, for easy access by on-line educators.

In Successful Learning Improvement Programs, What Characteristics are Associated with Increased GPA and Retention?

Despite many other differences, successful learning improvement programs share two essential characteristics. They are more comprehensive in the range of students' needs met, and they are better institutionalized into the academic mainstream of the college or university.

What Types of Learning Improvement Programs are Generally Used?

Using the essential characteristics of comprehensiveness and institutionalization as the basis for differentiating programs, researchers have widely used and studied four basic program types. Most common and least effective are the Level I, isolated remedial skills courses. In ascending order (for impact on GPA and retention) are programs that combine each of these additional elements with the basic skills courses: Level II, learning assistance to individual students; Level III, course-related supplementary learning activities for some objectives; and Level IV, comprehensive learning systems in academic courses.

What Program Features and Characteristics are Associated with Improved GPA and Retention?

Twenty-six critical variables for learning improvement, as described by the researchers, are presented in the Hierarchy of Decisions. The possible choices that educators can make for each variable are identified and ranked for effectiveness to increase overall academic achievements.

Within the Hierarchy of Decisions, the 26 variables are grouped as decisions relating to goals and rationale, instructional methods and content, institutional policies and standards, professional and paraprofessional staff and roles, and the evaluation of learning improvement programs. The importance of some of the specific variables may be surprising, however, because they typically are not purposefully managed by college planners. Poor decisions about unrecognized but important determinants of achievement therefore often undercut the effectiveness of an institution's academic programs.

Variables such as the perception of the institution's responsibility, the local rationale for learning services, and the prevailing attitude toward nontraditional students may seem intangible. Yet they profoundly affect students' achievement and are highly responsive to leadership within a college or university.

Variables such as the responsiveness to students, prerequisite skills development, and the course instructor's role may appear tradition-bound and resistant to change. Yet they are readily evolved when remedial/development program resources are aligned with academic program resources to achieve specific, targeted goals.

The proper management of variables such as the direction of students into appropriate courses and services, the enforcement of competencies in academic courses, and the use of systematic advisement procedures restores greater control of educational processes and outcomes to the faculty. The necessity for compromising quality to maintain enrollment is thereby reduced.

Why is Learning Improvement Inexorably Bound to Instructional Change in Today's Postsecondary Environment?

The interdependence of these two values — improved learning and changed instruction — is the central message of the research literature. How to obtain these values in a college or university is the central message of The Decision Guide For Effective Programs.

The potential of a particular decision to promote or inhibit change in a college's academic program is an inherent value for ranking possible choices about policies and programs to improve learning. The involvement of other faculty, administrators, and counselors profoundly affects both the content of the learning services offered and their success by fostering not only remediation for prerequisite abilities but also facilitative adaptations in the presentation of academic material. Gaps in background knowledge are bridged and inappropriate behaviors are overcome within the academic setting so that genuine learning can occur.

This interaction among academic and developmental educators and their shared problem solving is the fundamental dynamic in successful learning improvement programs, producing gains in GPA and retention that cannot be delivered by remedial/developmental personnel working alone in remedial settings. In most colleges and universities today, an administration that constrains developmental educators to isolated roles consigns to itself and to the academic faculty the unpleasant tasks of negotiating precarious compromises of program integrity amid today's relentless pressures for survival.

Overall thought for piecemeal action

Few educators enjoy the luxury of starting over or the freedom to single-handedly execute sweeping changes in existing programs. Yet through their decisions, faculty and administrators control enormous resources that can be coordinated to produce greater control of learning outcomes than is commonly perceived. Educators need to know what specific activities and changes would be likely to improve learning, how to begin making the transition to more effective instruction, and how to focus resources on high priority objectives.

Educators who use the Decision Guide achieve greater control of educational processes and outcomes through the use of more effective techniques of management, delivery, and evaluation. The use of the Decision Guide ensures the consideration of a full range of options and leads to the recognition of the possibilities available in an institution through the integration of typically fragmented and underused existing resources. Planners of instruction and student services find within the Decision Guide the best methods for bringing students to standards of achievement that are acceptable for the college disciplines. The use of the Decision Guide also fosters long-term planning, interdisciplinary innovation, and evolutionary change to more effective programs, even as short-term constraints force an immediate continuation of less desirable alternatives.

"Overall thought tends to lead to attempts to overall action, but overall action tends to lead to overall resistance. Piecemeal action tends to follow piecemeal thought," wrote Harvard President Lowell in 1938. "The difficult task is to get overall thought and then to have the patience and the persistence to carry out its conclusions one at a time . . . " (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1977, p. 16). The Decision Guide for Effective Programs provides research-based "overall thought" to guide the pragmatic educator's "piecemeal actions," through with instructional programs and change can be evolved.

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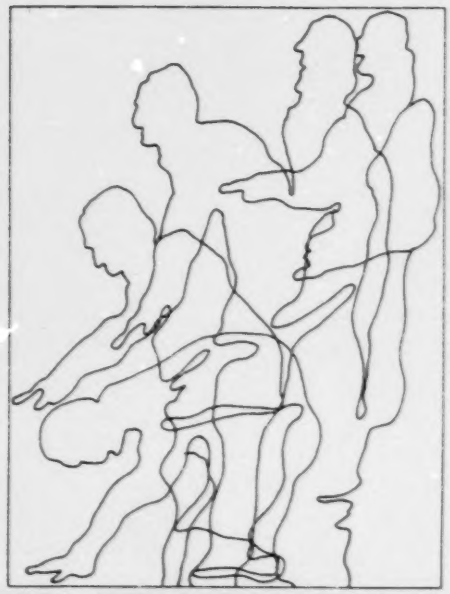

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Raising Academic Standards

ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report 1983

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"This report is the best guide ever written for developing or improving remedial programs in colleges. I have shown it to some of my colleagues and they also feel the same. In fact, we found the rationale for making improvements in our programs presented very clearly. The report could become a classic in remedial education."

Gary K. Probst
Professor of Reading
Prince Georges Community College

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